Robin Blaser / A CORRESPONDENCE

—No longer is it 'x explains x, signed x' . . .
x explains y, signed z'

Gilles Deleuze

Dear Lisa,

Your questions set me off. Poetry is a river—shallows, sandbars, rapids, and pages. What is an interview for? Let me riffle a few pages.

> Whatever the tone, the process of question and answer is made to nourish dualisms. . . . Dualisms no longer relate to unities, but to successive choices: are you white or black, man or woman, rich or poor, etc? . . . Even when we speak for ourselves, we always speak in the place of someone else who will not be able to speak. (Claire Parnet)
>
> We must pass through [passer par] dualisms because they are in language, it's not a question of getting rid of them, but we must fight against language, invent stammering, not in order to get back to a prelinguistic pseudo-reality, but to trace a vocal or written line which will make language flow between these dualisms, and which will define a minority usage of language, an inherent variation. . . . (Claire Parnet.)

These quotations—epigraphs for this occasion—are from *Dialogues* by Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet (trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Barbara Habberjam, Columbia University Press, 1987, pp. 19, 19-20, and 34)—the opening chapter "A Conversation: What is it? What is it for?" Good questions, put to themselves. After separate initial statements, they write the rest of the book as if they had flowed together in the middle of something. I have long thought of conversation as fundamental community, one to one, and then with many, as work, food, shelter, clothing, sexuality, memory, thought, art, entertainment, and our mortality gather us. Nothing so simple-minded as a dualism—me Alley, you Oops, or vice versa. Cosmos, belief, and mystery are not absent here: these big words seem to stop dead in our tracks. Perhaps, like Opal Whiteley, we could dig them up when they dry out and keep them

in the back of our kitchen drawer. We are nomads of them. These big words try to name elementarinesses that exist between things—interstices, apertures, chinks in the body. The concern with cosmology is as old as the human record, as is the personal voice that tries to articulate its presence there, and will not leave us alone in any theism or atheism. In recent years, some have substituted the word *ideology* for this whole busyness. Recently, thanks to thinking alongside Susan Howe and Michel de Certeau, I've preferred the word *heterology*—logos of the other, lower case. The Greek *hetero* means *other* in contrast to *homo* which means *same.* In this concern, one should, I suggest, at one's earliest convenience, hone one's reasoning abilities in order to converge with the great and fragile history of human thought of totalities and unities. The word *belief* points to something so direct and simple, what is dear—that is what *lief* means in the ages of our language—what one may trust in the face of the corruptions and blasphemies of contemporary religions. The word *mystery* derives from a Greek verb meaning *to close, to be shut,* where Keats's Negative Capability begins—the lore of "uncertainties."

I have listed these vitalities of what we are—against dualisms—in no particular order, because they offer no hierarchy that commands us. They are, in fact, disorderly complexities and multiplicities. I think we search for the languages of this. The simplifications of subjectivity and of objectivity are unexpectedly reversible, thus becoming something other than what the self-hunters and the poetry of ditties have told us. Subject, object, abject, reject, superject—these are conditions of being thrown—under, against, away from, again, and through something or another. Our difficulty in speaking about, even thinking about, our materiality—from which we try so hard to escape—is in bond to the inherited dualism of matter and spirit, also unexpectedly reversible. Which one are you for? Abra caws for Dabra, stupefying the words.

These vitalities of what we share propose a moral dimension—that is to say, our conduct within what we share, all of them close to home. Capitalism knows nothing of conduct in these matters. Twentieth-century Marxist practice betrayed conduct within shared reality across the board. It is left to us to reread the last great thinkers of social justice, Marx and Gramsci, to find for ourselves a way through and argue it. Now again, we do, indeed, have a supernatural that deforms our lives—it is called corporate ideology, superposed, supersonic, superphysical, supraorbital, supraliminal. Super, for short! I advise artists to read John

Ralston Saul's *The Unconscious Civilization*, CBC Massey Lectures (Anansi, 1995). I'll call capitalism monetary superstition. This suprabeing that moves mountains of money has its rodomantadors—politicians and advertisers. As I heard it on CBC and put it in a poem exactly,

"Advertising tells us who we are and presents
a completely integrated culture."

The British Columbian NDP is a case in point with its recent educational policy of shifting funds on the secondary and post-secondary levels toward the job market—sounds good, but it is unconscious of what it joins and what it betrays, not the educated, but those who would be educated—those who may wish to know something about the vast effort over centuries to be civilized, to be just, to find happiness—to be able to think, something you can't do alone—to be able to experience, for much of experience is under covers, as if a multitude had slept through it—to undertake democracy, that very recent political possibility—to be familiar with twentieth-century arts, the disturbance that they are, the rage they speak, the celebrations they offer—to be on intelligent speaking terms with the tasks of contemporary philosophy and science. These are dimensions of what we share, given, that is, a sociality that allows for such a bottomless adventure. Notice: this is not a bottomline, as the ubiquity of that accountant's word would have it.

Language enters into all of this as if it were itself a quest rather than a linguistics—the biological and psychological facts of it, the job of it, the pleasure of it. The "rustle of language," in Barthes's phrase. A very great part of our activity in language is pragmatic. A considerable reserve of imagination is pragmatic. The arts of the twentieth century before and after World War II are pragmatic in crisis and for change. This is also the side of poetry that is close to matters-of-fact, but not exactly matter-of-fact. The "unruly" and "disruptive" characteristics of contemporary arts have broken down the modernist, critical misapprehension that the arts are autonomous, transcendental, and apart. They have been and are transgressive, antinomian, and antithetical for good reason and they are startling imagination of interrelations, the shares. Félix Guattari argued a "pragmatic of language." I am drawing attention to certain points in his argument here, as Deleuze and Parnet summarize them in *Dialogues*—just to think them over-brackets identify my insertions:

(1) it is pragmatics which is essential because it is the true politics, the micro-politics of language [recognized as each person enters the task and expression of it];

(2) there are no universals or invariants of language, no 'competence' separate from 'performances' [where the 'I' occurs and is according to its measure and style];

(3) there is no abstract machine internal to language, only abstract machines which provide language with a particular collective assemblage of enunciation [this is the way ideologies work, corporate ideology in the present instance] (there is no subject of enunciation) [we all experience this displacement], at the same time as they [the abstract machines] provide content with a particular machine of desire [i.e., advertising] (there is no signifier of desire) [it's a machine];

(4) there are therefore several languages in a language, at the same time as there are all sorts of fluxes in the contents that are sent out, combined and continued. The point is not 'bilingual,' 'multilingual'; the point is that every language is so bilingual, itself so multilingual, that one can stutter in one's own language, that is push ever further the points of deterritorialization of assemblages. [This deterritorialization is, one by one, tortuous and labyrinthian, and right here poetry and art step into a 'territory' that is not provided by the abstract machinery—there is no map.] A language is criss-crossed by lines of flight that carry off its vocabulary and syntax. [I.e., Mallarmé and many another poet you may have read—this what is meant by the materiality of language.]

It is curious what passes into the *hands* of poetry. Its record across centuries is one of protest and resistance, of flight and interrelations, close and far, even to time as the life of space. But protest and resistance are basics of the lyric stance. I think of the point that Giorgio Agamben makes in *Infancy and History*:

> The original cohesion of poetry and politics in our culture was sanctioned from the very start by the fact that Aristotle's treatment of music is contained in the *Politics*, and that Plato's themes of poetry and art are to be found in the *Republic*; it is therefore a matter beyond dispute. The question is not so much whether poetry has any bearing on politics, but whether politics remains equal to its original cohesion with poetry. (147-148)

So you have set me off, part of the foregoing answering in advance of your specific question.

From Lisa Robertson
Two quests for Robin:
I'm seduced by those overgrown Wildean paths. More than the loss of the sacred, I regret the modernist exfoliation of decadence (though these are in counterpoint). I get gorgeously lost in such exuberant thickets as "The Sphinx" for example, but "I am to ask a question/where no question exists."
On CBC (as we were driving through orchards) George Steiner spoke of the social necessity of remembrance coupled with the contemporary impossibility of committing "the great mistake of hope." I sense style as a concretion of the impossibility almost emblematically in *Cups: "The Muse requires a politics."* I wish you could describe a little the emblem hope-politics-style-remembrance.

Lisa, I didn't know what to make of your adjective "Wildean," overgrown or not. It's loaded and tumbles like clothes in the dryer at the launderet: homosexuality, decadence, paganism, aestheticism, the "religion of beauty." Aestheticism, in which Wilde has a notable part, runs from Ruskin through the Pre-Raphaelites beyond Pater and Wilde to the striking mind of Rachel Annand Taylor in the early years of this century. Her *Leonardo the Florentine* is absolutely memorable, or should be. The last who knew a very great deal about Aestheticism was Richard Aldington: "Aestheticism ceased to be a fashionable fad with the trial and condemnation of Oscar Wilde in 1896." He does not mean that it was merely a fad, rather that it became so in the turmoil of the place of art in everyday life that was so much the sphinx's question in the nine-

teenth century. Most obviously, H.D., Bryher, Yeats, Pound, the Sitwells, and Stevens were at least initially still answering. But Wilde's trial and condemnation are billboards of the defeat of aestheticism. How curious that sexuality would be made the blunt instrument of it! It was certainly convenient.

The word *Wildean* assembles a phantom—the effete, the effeminate, the soulful, the aesthete, the fake, the purple patcher, the affected and silly, the queer, etc.—nothing here about his kindness and charm, his love of his wife and his sons, his fine intelligence that worked by paradox—the consistency one finds in his art and criticism as always *para-doxa*, against opinion—nothing here about his courage—nothing about his elegance which was always fragile and challenged from within—no interest at all in the realm of desire that would become his obsession. The word *aesthete*, used as a negation, is meant to perfect the masculine principle, pretty picture that that is. The notion of "purple patches" in prose or poetry is Wilde's own critical insight. Wilde was carrying a lily to Lillie Langtry, for whom he'd written *Lady Windemere's Fan*, when he was seen walking down the Strand. The word *homosexual* is of late coinage and might better be replaced by a slang word like *queer*, which is at least honest about a perspective from which it glares. The word *homosexual* comes into English along with the word *heterosexual* in 1892 by way of C.G. Chaddock's translation of Krafft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and both were picked up by Havelock Ellis in his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* in 1897. As Shakespeare has it, taking the word from Latin around 1598, "Go to: *homo* is a common name to all men" (*Henry IV, Part I*, Act 2, Scene 1, 88). There the word means *human being*. The word *heterosexual* is used to name a norm. But the record there hardly has the distinction of a norm and it is an uneasy matter, indeed. To put it bluntly, you can make of sexuality any kind of fake you want to, but it remains there, various and surrounding, as Sappho tells us. On this matter of sexuality and condemnation, I particularly like this remark by Wilde to his friend Robert Ross, during his final illness:

> When the last trumpet sounds and we are couched in our porphyry tombs, I will turn and say, "Robbie, Robbie, let us pretend we do not hear!"

With few exceptions, aestheticism was overwhelmed in the United States and Canada by the newspapers and Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience*, which preceded Wilde's lecture tours over here in 1882. See Kevin O'Brien's *Oscar Wilde in Canada: An Apostle for the Arts* (1982).

Patience is very funny, but its point is that aestheticism is fake. Lady Jane, one of the "Rapturous Maidens," says to herself and to us, of course, early in the play:

> There is a transcendentality of delirium—an acute accentuation of a supremest ecstasy—which the earthy might easily mistake for indigestion. But it is *not* indigestion—it is aesthetic transfiguration.

Wilde is represented as Reginald Bunthorne (a Fleshy Poet). This is the key passage, Bunthorne's soliloquy:

> Am I alone
> And unobserved? I am!
> Then let me own
> I'm an aesthetic sham!
>
> The air severe
> Is but a mere
> Veneer!
>
> This cynic smile
> Is but a wile
> Of guile!
>
> This costume chaste
> Is but good taste
> Misplaced!
>
> Let me confess!
>
> A languid love of lillies does *not* blight me!
> Lank limbs and haggard cheeks do *not* delight me!
> I do not care for dirty greens
> By any means.
> I do *not* long for all one sees
> That's Japanese.
>
> I am *not* fond of uttering platitudes
> In stained-glass attitudes.
> In short, my mediaevalism's affectation,

Born of a morbid love of admiration!

Notice the exclamation marks, which suggest Wilde's manner of speaking, and the swipes at the Pre-Raphaelites whose realism would be ignored or disapproved as it was by Dickens. Wilde was trapped, though the best of his work was still to come.

So, what was at stake in this escapade with beauty? To track it, one would have to go back to Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819) and think though what the Urn tells us:

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

There, later in the century when Keats's letters are known will be found the problem of Negative Capability and the discipline of "uncertainties," which Olson would pick up in *The Special View of History*. Keats is the muse of the escapade. We would then have to keep some memory of Ruskin, perhaps his *Fors Clavigera* [Fortune the Clubbearer]: *Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (1877-1883):

> . . . Giotto's Justice has no bandage about her eyes, (Albert Dürer's has them *round* open, and flames flashing from them), and weighs not with scales, but with her own hands. . . .(15 October 1871)

And above all Walter Pater, especially the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* (1873) where one finds:

> To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. . . . Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of such wisdom, this poetic passion, the desire for beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.

In Pater and Wilde, condemned sexuality informed the moment, and would subdue the one and condemn the other. Both insist on a poetics of life in the public place. And since poetics is a major principle of freedom, we should remember this escapade and them. The story, Lisa, is too long for this occasion. I have left William Morris out, for example, and most of the poets. Swinburne belongs here and———achievement in language.

But I can't pass by the French connection. Let Baudelaire, Nerval, and Mallarmé haunt us, as they do me, as they do the poetry of this escapade. Only one poet in North America stands brilliantly among them—Poe is a matter for another conversation— Émile Nelligan, also condamné—Qu'est devenu mon coeur, navire déserté?—What has become of my heart, abandoned ship? Let a line from a poem by Nerval, "Les Cydalises" ("The Glories"), float by, because Nelligan loved that poem—Où sont nos amoureuses?—Where are our lovers? And we step, whether we like it or not, into the twentieth century.

Now, on this Wildean occasion—as it turns out—allow me to draw forward two marvellous books of this French connection. You'll find them carefully noticed in Richard Aldington's unsuperceded "Introduction" to *The Portable Oscar Wilde* (1946). Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835). Gautier's "Preface" is a marvel of useful arrogance and laughter. Here one finds what was the negative capability of beauty and truth translated into "the religion of beauty," the protest against the hypocrisy of cultural "virtue," the point of ant-Utilitarianism (later so stunningly told in Dickens's *Hard Times* in a very different way), and the problem of it all, Art-for-Art's Sake.

> One of the most ridiculous things in the glorious epoch which we have the happiness to live in is undoubtedly the rehabilitation of virtue. It is undertaken by every paper, whatever its political hue, red, green, or tricolour. . . .
>
> They applied to literature the article in the Ten Commandments:
>
> *Thou shalt not kill.*
>
> People could no longer allow themselves the least little dramatic murder, and the fifth act had become impossible. . . .
>
> You don't make yourself a cotton cap out of a metonymy, you don't put on a comparison instead of a slipper; you can't use antithesis as an umbrella. . . . I have a deep conviction that an ode is too light an apparel for the winter. . . .
>
> (Joanna Richardson's fine translation)

And Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Antony* (1874). It's actually poetry. There's an excellent translation by Kitty Mrosovsky (Penguin 1983) that ought in justice to bring the book all the way into English. Her brilliant "Introduction" brings forward those who have read it well—Valéry, that "it left him at the mercy of a 'dizzily unleashed library'"—Foucault whom she quotes on his reading of it, "As an exciting form of imaginative life, not meant to deny reality, but appearing in the 'interstices' between signs, books and commentaries. . . . The library is ablaze." She gives us the necessary first step into these pages: "The open Bible which Antony pores over is of key importance, the very locus of temptation." I want to offer a teaser from one passage near the end of the book:

> And opposite, on the other side of the Nile,
> all at once the Sphinx appears.
> He stretches his paws, shakes the fillets on
> his brow, and lies down on his stomach.
> Striking her wings with her dragon's tail,
> as she leaps, flies, and spits fire from her
> nostrils, comes the green-eyed Chimera, wheeling,
> yelping.
> On one side her long ringlets are tossed away
> to tangle with the hair on her back, and on the
> other they dangle down to the sand and sway with
> the rocking of her body.
>
> THE SPHINX
>
> is motionless, and watches the Chimera:
>
> Stay here, Chimera; stop!
>
> THE CHIMERA
>
> No, never!
>
> THE SPHINX
>
> Don't run so fast, don't fly so high, don't
> yelp so loud!
>
> THE CHIMERA
>
> Don't call to me, don't call to me, since
> you're forever dumb!

I hope you will go on reading. Of course, it takes the whole book to reach Antony's final soliloquy:

> délirent:
>
> O bonheur! bonheur! J'ai vu naître la vie j'ai vu le mouvement commencer.
>
> deliriously:
>
> O happiness! happiness! I have seen the birth of life, I have seen the beginning of movement. The blood in my veins is beating so hard that it will burst them. I feel like flying, swimming, yelping, bellowing, howling. I'd like to have wings, a carapace, a rind, to breathe out smoke, wave my trunk, twist my body, divide myself up, to be inside everything, to drift away with odours, develop as plants do, flow like water,
> vibrate like sound, gleam like light, to curl myself up into every shape, to penetrate each atom, to get down to the depth of matter—to be matter!

We step into the twentieth century, don't we? Sphinx and Chimera, companions of everyday.

Lisa, back to your "quests." I do not agree that the sacred is lost—or even at a loss. It is being integrated in poetry and in that companion thought that also uses operative language, philosophy. The sacred and the profane are false in their dualism. The sacred and the secular are false in their dualism. Thus, the Sphinx who is also the Chimera climbs up the body of Oedipus, as in that astonishing painting by Moreau (1864)—with claws. In the poem that follows my Sphinx, which you kindly mention, a figure is caught, unable to move among the broken pieces of mirror on the floor, though he sees himself piece by piece down there. I don't understand your phrase "the modernist exfoliation of decadence"—whether of leaves falling or of some huge skin flaking. Modernism develops out of what the last end-of-a-century's apocalypse thought was cultural decay, rather like our own. The last thing I would call decadent is the work in art of this century, though it is often at a loss; thus, the postmodernisms and the WHATEVER comes after that. Change and the thought of what is irreparable in cultural deformation seems to me to be more to the point.

I regret that I did not hear George Steiner on CBC. You tantalizingly summarize—"the social necessity of remembrance coupled with the contemporary impossibility of committing 'the great mistakes of hope.'" I won't presume to reconstruct what that brilliantly civilized man was saying. He would not have meant that hope is a mistake. The principle of hope is probably biological, but when we turned it into the fortune-telling of twentieth century politics and historicism we were ravaged. We are now witnessing the most nefarious attack on democracy—though we are told only Communism did that—that could be imagined by Capitalism. These are great mistakes that counter hope, while the stupidifyers jabber on about elitism. Anti-intellectualism and anti-memory currents of our culture flow into the estuaries of the Moral Majority, so they name their politics. Hope may well sit on her globe, blindfolded, as in a kitschy painting by Watts that I like. Memory is fundamental to the mind at work—it helps to know how ancient we are, it helps to know the art and thought that go into the structure of meaning changing meaning. *Remembrance* is a gentle word to describe the energy that goes into this, according to our abilities and chances. You bring up style in this, a word that has been stretched. Traditionally, we are told that style is the man or the woman—true up to a point, but that could also be said of table manners. Some years ago, I took from Merleau-Ponty the notion that style in poetry and prose is better thought of as the distance moved in the language. Language is a way of travelling.

Thank you, Lisa. Your "emblem hope-politics-style-remembrance" struck me as blazons of poetry.

Robin Blaser